

CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor,

Questioning the Courage of William James

While I very much appreciate Dr Alan Gauld's generally positive review of my book, *Resurrecting Leonora Piper: How Science Discovered the Afterlife*, in the July 2013 issue of the *Journal* (Gauld, 2013), I do feel a need to address his concerns and comments relative to my remarks about William James, the distinguished psychologist, philosopher and psychical researcher of yesteryear.

In effect, while otherwise admiring Professor James and his pioneering role in psychical research, I dared question his courage, suggesting that he might have accepted the spirit/survival hypothesis much more than he expressed publicly, but sat on the fence all his life out of concern for his reputation in the academic and scientific communities. I further opined that James's attitude might have influenced other researchers to remain on the fence, as to oppose him could have resulted in professional suicide. Of course, the primary researchers in the Piper phenomena — Richard Hodgson, Frederic Myers, Oliver Lodge, and James Hyslop—all had the courage to come off the fence, planting both feet firmly on the side of spirits and survival. And while not then called *superpsi*, the combination of the teloteropathy (telepathy at a distance) and the cosmic reservoir theories amounted to much the same thing, being given full consideration by those esteemed researchers.

Writing in the November 1919 issue of the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, Professor Hyslop, who had known James personally, and, in fact, came to know of Mrs Piper from him, stated that "James seems to have confused means and ends in the method of determining ethical truth, and also to have wholly missed the basis of scientific truth which may be wider than ethical truth." (Hyslop, 1919, p.559, emphasis mine). That is, James's pragmatism was sound for ethics, but was not the criterion of fact which is the object of science and philosophy. "While his aim was apparently to establish science in the place of dogmatism and abstraction," Hyslop went on, "*he stated his position so that it meant something else and only aroused controversy instead of solving a problem. The opposition is between empirical and a priori methods, not between theoretical and practical, or between 'rational' and 'pragmatic' methods*" (loc. cit., emphasis mine).

Hyslop further stated that James leaned toward polytheism and seemed to prefer the doctrine of Spiritualism, but he "*could not openly avow such a doctrine*." He added that "when it came to that one doctrine and the application of his view to it, *he halted with more respect than the logic of his pragmatism required*" (Hyslop, 1919, p.561, emphasis mine).

Hyslop continued:—

The fact is that he never clearly understood the problem of psychic research. This is clearly proved by his anomalous and paradoxical position in the Ingersoll lecture on the immortality of the Soul, delivered at Harvard University. He had very little to do with the Society's work, tho [*sic*] the public thought he had much to do with it, and after he had rejected the spiritual-body doctrine of Swedenborg it was hard to make him see just what the tendencies of psychic research were. He returned to what he ought to

have regarded as wallowing in the mire of Hegelianism when he felt a leaning toward the cosmic reservoir theory. But this aside, the main point is that he could never boldly decide between the respectable philosophy of pantheism or monism and the logical tendencies of his pluralism which should have taken him with less evidence into spiritism than would be required to convert the materialist.

[Hyslop, 1919, pp. 561–563]

In his 1902 classic, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James didn't even mention Mrs Piper or the extensive research carried out with her by the ASPR and the SPR. He alluded to it by mentioning a "discovery" in 1886 suggesting that there is a consciousness outside of the primary consciousness (James, 1902, p. 191), but steered clear of the 'M' (mediumship) and 'S' (spirits) words.

According to Hyslop, James asked Hodgson to review the proofs of his 1902 book—which was actually a collection of lectures he had given—before they were printed. Hodgson was somewhat perplexed at the fact that in the 400-plus pages of the book James never directly addressed the survival issue, the very crux of religion. He apparently let James know of his disappointment in that respect. Whether to appease Hodgson or to correct his oversight, James then added a postscript to the book. In that section of the book, he wrote:—

Religion, in fact, for the great majority of our own race means immortality, and nothing else. God is the producer of immortality, and whoever has doubts of immortality is written down as an atheist without further trial. I have said nothing in my lectures about immortality or the belief therein, for me it seems a secondary point. If our ideals are only cared for in 'eternity', I do not see why we might not be willing to resign their care to other hands than ours. Yet I sympathize with the urgent impulse to be present ourselves, and in the conflict of impulses, both of them so vague yet both of them noble, I know not to decide. It seems to me that it is eminently a case for facts to testify. Facts, I think, are yet lacking for 'spirit return', though I have the highest respect for the patient labors of Messrs. Myers, Hodgson, and Hyslop, and am somewhat impressed by their favorable conclusions. I consequently leave the matter open, with this brief word to save the reader from possible perplexity as to why immortality got no mention in the body of this book.

[James, 1902, p. 406]

James went on to say that the only thing the religious experience can unequivocally testify to is "that we can experience union with *something* larger than ourselves and in that union find our greatest peace" (James, 1902, p. 406).

And yet, while seemingly claiming that survival was a 'secondary' concern, he wrote that "the luster of the present hour is always borrowed from the background of possibilities it goes with. Let our common experiences be enveloped in an eternal moral order" (James, 1902, p. 124). In another essay, he stressed that the "permanent presence of the sense of futurity in the mind has been strangely ignored by most writers, but the fact is that our consciousness at a given moment is very free from the ingredient of expectancy" (James, 1948, p. 13). Moreover, James was said to have considered suicide in his younger years as a result of his 'soul sickness', or belief that there was nothing beyond this world.

Early in the book, James stated that the 'moralist'—apparently the name for the humanist at that time—can get by without religious beliefs until the body begins to decay or "when morbid fears invade the mind" (James, 1902, p. 54). The logical inference here is that he was referring to the moralist's fear of extinction and the religionist's hope for life after death.

In concluding the book, before the postscript, James stated, "I *can*, of course, put myself into the sectarian scientist's attitude, and imagine vividly that the world of sensations and of scientific laws and objects may be all. But whenever I do this, I hear that inward monitor of which W. K. Clifford once wrote, whispering the word 'bosh!' Humbug is humbug, even though it bear the scientific name, and the total expression of human experience, as I view it objectively, invincibly urges me beyond the narrow 'scientific' bounds." (James, 1902, p. 401)

Still, James continually beat around the bush on the survival issue, disguising it in other words, most often referring to it as the 'eternal'. He said that a person should be content in his or her faith that there is a higher power, even if that higher power does not promise life after death. "For practical life at any rate," he concluded the postscript, "the *chance* of salvation is enough" (James, 1902, p. 408). In effect, he was saying that the blind faith of religion is enough, whereas the goal of psychical research was to move from disbelief or blind faith to conviction through scientifically-developed evidence.

While James seems to have favoured the 'secondary personality' theory when it came to Dr Phinuit and the Emperor group, two of Mrs Piper's primary controls, he never explained why he thought George Pellew, the control between Phinuit and the Emperor group, was a secondary personality. At least I have not been able to find anything in my search of the SPR and ASPR records offering an explanation for not so classifying Pellew, who was known to Hodgson and other researchers before his tragic death at the age of 32. Is it not logical to assume that if Pellew had been incarnate at one time, that both Phinuit and the Emperor group also existed in the flesh at some time in the past?

In 1909, the year before his death, James, who called Mrs Piper his 'white crow', the one who proved that not all crows are black, stated that he was "baffled as to spirit return . . . I personally am as yet neither a convinced believer in parasitic demons, nor a spiritist, nor a scientist, but still remain a psychical researcher waiting for more facts before concluding" (Murphy, 1961, pp. 322-23). Following James's example, today's researchers are still waiting for more facts. Will there ever be enough? Will any of them ever display the courage of Hodgson, Myers, Lodge and Hyslop?

Perhaps James explained his position when he wrote that he was wilfully taking the point of view of the so-called 'rigorously scientific' disbeliever, and making an *ad hominem* plea because, tactically, it is better to believe too little than too much (Murphy & Ballou, 1960, p. 41). I interpret that to mean that he preferred the 'safe' approach, one in which he didn't have to put his reputation on the line. And so it continues.

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Alan Gauld replies,

I am grateful for the opportunity of commenting on Michael Tymn's reply to my review. It occurs to me that I may have misunderstood him when he says "To have opposed him [i.e. William James] could have resulted in professional suicide", and if so I apologise. I read this as implying that James might himself conceivably have taken steps to extinguish the careers of these putative opponents. Such an action would have been entirely foreign to him. But if Tymn's meaning was that if an academic psychologist or philosopher had indeed gone further than James in suggesting that psychical research had provided convincing evidence for survival he might have brought down trouble on his own head, I would not disagree.

For the rest, the divergence between my view and Tymn's of the character and opinions of William James is too wide to be gone into here. I will confine myself to making two points:-

1. James's reference to the discovery in 1886 of a consciousness outside the primary consciousness had almost certainly nothing to do with Mrs Piper and mediumship but referred to the early work of Pierre Janet between 1886 and 1889, in which James was much interested.

2. James was usually circumspect in the way he spoke of Phinuit, G.P., etc., but he did at least once verge on saying that G.P. was or had become a secondary personality. In his "Report on Mrs. Piper's Hodgson-Control" (1909, p.38) he says of G.P. "within a few years he has degenerated into a shadow of his former self . . . Whatever he may have been at first, he seems to me at last to have 'passed on', leaving that amount of impression on the trance-organism's habits." If Tymn chooses to interpret this as yet another example of William James facing both ways, so be it!

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